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Lincoln's Gettysburp Address

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When I discovered the poor transcribing in a volume of originally autograph letters, I wondered what might have happened if Lincoln's Gettysburg Address had gotten into the wrong hands. Why are so few editions of letters reviewed for fidelity to their manuscript sources?—Author's note.

The story of the proofreading of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address—the printed version that he prepared soon after the speech at the cemetery—helps us understand what Walt Whitman meant when he wrote: "The real war will never get in the books." And it helps to explain why he added that maybe it shouldn't.

Lincoln knew that his speech was an important bit of history. So he polished up the original, on which he had been working before he took the train to Gettysburg—don't believe for a moment that he risked dashing the original off on a rattling and jolting train. He prepared the newly polished version in his own hand again after dinner one evening.

At 9 P.M. he handed the manuscript to Abel Rushmore Jenkins, a printer and newspaper publisher. One of Lincoln's political friends had recommended Jenkins as the only publisher in the area who had gone all out for him in the last election, and as no worse a printer than many of the others nearby. Jenkins was so devoted to speeding up the Civil War that he volunteered to get

the speech set up after hours in his shop. Then he and an assistant would proofread it, and have it in brochures and on posters—everything decorated with stars and stripes—by morning.

"Let me look at the proofs before you run off all that material," said Lincoln. "That will slow things up terribly," said Jenkins. "We'll be ready by three in the morning, but you'll probably be asleep by then."

"It will have to wait till ten," said Lincoln. "If I get up at three, I'll never get back to sleep again. I have to speak to three generals, four senators, seven representatives, and ninety-four job applicants tomorrow. It will be a demanding day."

The manuscript he handed Jenkins read—we repeat the words as later generations have known them:

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

"Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

"But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be

dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

At ten o'clock the next morning Jenkins and Farr, one of his journeyman printers, were shown into Lincoln's office again. "Did you have any trouble setting up the speech?" Lincoln asked.

"Your handwriting isn't the easiest, Mr. President." Jenkins said. "But it isn't the hardest either, and the speech is the shortest I've ever printed. Farr and I had it all set up and proofread by midnight. You should have let us run it off, and we'd have had thousands of brochures at the post office by now."

"Let's look at it," said Lincoln. "Maybe you'll be able to print some copies this morning."

He put on his spectacles and took up the proof sheet.

"Four score and seven years ago," he mumbled, "our fa—our FEATHERS!...What's *feathers* doing here?"

"If that's what it says, that's what you wrote, Mr. President," said Jenkins.

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"Well, maybe I did give that 'a' an extra loop. But *feathers?* Did you think I was talking about Indian chiefs?"

"We didn't think about it at all, Mr. President," said Farr. "The people of the United States elected you to do the thinking."

"...our feathers brought forth on this continent a new notion..."

"See, Mr. President, we're getting things right," said Jenkins.

"...conceived in Library..."

"My brother was in a library once," said Farr. "He painted three big rooms."

"...and dedicated to the preposition that all men are created equine."

"That speech is going to go over big," said Jenkins. "We'll have a first printing of 25,000 brochures on quality paper."

Lincoln wiped his brow. "It's early in the day, but I feel exhausted already."

"You've been working too hard, Mr. President," said Jenkins. "You should have let us handle everything."

"What does *equine* mean?" Lincoln asked.

"It means on horseback, of course," said Jenkins. All men are created on horseback—the country will love the idea. We'll get 100,000 volunteers for the cavalry."

"...Now we *age* enraged..." Lincoln read on.

"It's been two and a half years since the war started. We must be aging," Lincoln commented.

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"... enraged, in a grea—good God— greek civil war—testing whether that notion, or any notion so concerned and so dedicated, can long endure."

"I'm glad you didn't read that last word as *manure,* " said Lincoln.

"We wouldn't do that. There's a 'd' in it." said Farr.

"...We are met on a greek battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a potion of that field, as a final testing place for those who here gave their wives..."

Lincoln stopped reading. "Are you married, Mr. Jenkins?" he asked with curiosity.

"I've been married for twenty-three years, Mr. President."

"Happily married?"

"We have our ups and downs. For the past twelve years it's been more downs than ups. That's why I put in long nights at the shop."

"If wives can give their husbands in the war, men can give their wives," said Lincoln.

"We did a careful job," Farr reassured him.

"...gave their wives that this notion might live," Lincoln continued. "It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not concentrate—we can not hello this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here—no, you've got *here* as *hero*—who struggled hero, have concentrated it, far above our poor power to add or subtract."

"We've got a bunch of heroes, maybe like Achilles, in this Greek civil war," said Lincoln. "Listen to this passage: "The world will little note nor long remember that we say hero, but it can never forget that they did hero.'

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"It sounds great," said Farr.

"...It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be hero dedicated to the greek tash remaining before us..."

"What's a tash, Mr. Jenkins?" Lincoln asked.

"I don't have your learning, Mr. President."

"...the greek tash remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of demotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in rain—"

Lincoln stopped, stared at Jenkins, and asked, "Why *rain?*"

"Why? Mr. President."

"I forget—it's my speech," said Lincoln. "It's so that the soldiers' gunpowder won't get wet."

"That explains it," said Farr.

"...that this notion, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the...of the...

Lincoln took off his spectacles and wiped them clean of perspiration.

"Of the pimple," said Jenkins.

"Thank you. Now I can be sure of what I'm seeing," Lincoln said. "...of the pimple, by the...by the..."

"By the puddle," said Jenkins.

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"...by the puddle, for the...for the..."

"For the poodle," said Jenkins.

"Thank you," said Lincoln. "...and that government of the pimple, by the puddle, for the poodle, shall not perish from the earth."

"That's a marvelous ending for the speech, Mr. President," said Jenkins. "I saw how speaking it out loud again filled you with emotion."

Lincoln rubbed his eyes for some moments. Then—to check again that he hadn't suffered a fit of delirium—he reread the entire proof sheet:

"Four score and seven years ago our feathers brought forth on this continent, a new notion, conceived in Library, and dedicated to the preposition that all men are created equine.

"Now we age enraged in a greek civil war, testing whether that notion, or any notion so concerned and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a greek battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a potion of that field, as a final testing place for those who here gave their wives that this notion might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

"But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not concentrate—we can not hello this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled hero have concentrated it, far above our poor power to add or subtract. The world will little note, nor long remember that we say hero, but it can never forget that they did hero. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be hero dedicated to the greek tash remaining before us—that from these honored dead

we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of demotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in rain—that this notion, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the pimple, by the puddle, for the poodle, shall not perish from the earth."

Lincoln stood up—all six feet, four inches of him—to escort Jenkins and Farr to the door. Then he remembered that the 1864 election might be close, and he would want Jenkins' support. He settled into his chair again.

"Maybe I wrote that copy out in a hurry, Mr. Jenkins, but it seemed decipherable. You got lots of words wrong. Take the ending. It should be 'government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.' I'll place all my corrections in big print in the margins."

"But corrections will mean still another day's delay," complained Jenkins. "And what for? As for the ending—'of the pimple, by the puddle, for the poodle' sounds wonderful."

"What on earth did you think it could mean?" asked Lincoln.

"It's a mystery—like Revelation in the Bible," said Jenkins. "People will argue about what it could mean for thousands of years. That 'people' ending sounds ordinary compared to this one."

"Please make all the corrections and bring me new proofs at 10 A.M. tomorrow."

"Maybe you're unhappy about some of the details, Mr. President," said Jenkins. "But the big picture comes through. What matters to the nation is the big picture."

"The big pitcher is what matters," agreed Farr.

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"Tomorrow at 10 A.M., gentlemen."

"But Mr. President, think of the war," Jenkins pleaded.

"That's what I'm doing. Those soldiers died at Gettysburg so that the United States wouldn't go to the dogs—not even to poodles. I'll see you tomorrow at 10 A.M., gentlemen."

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